

# Winter Playscape Dreaming

by Rusty Keeler

## Go out and play

Hello! I hope you and your children are playfully discovering the outside world of wintertime. Winter, like all seasons, adds a new sense of mystery and discovery to the world of young children. We all feel the excitement of the first snowy day and share a child's sense of wonder when new layers of white transform our environments. Winter is the time when children can study snowflakes, find icicles, or observe the birds that share their yards. Outdoor playscapes, designed with plants and



PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS BY THE AUTHOR

rolling topography, magically transform themselves each season and offer enticing things to do all year long. Your playscape can, too. All it takes is some creative dreaming and planning.

## Seasonal playscapes

When we build natural playscapes for children out of landscape and sculpture, we have the opportunity to design in a multitude of seasonal play experiences. With help from volunteers, folks just like you are building play environments that are more like your grandmother's backyard and less like a "playground." These "natural playscapes" are built of earth, herbs, trees, pathways, flowers,

windchimes, sand, water, and more. As children play and flow through your outdoor space, they are discovering the wonders of life in each season. You can purposefully shape your yard to help shape your children's experience of the outdoors and the earth.

Think about the seasons in your area and what they look and feel like.

Now think about creating opportunities for children's play that celebrate those seasonal changes. Hills that children roll down in summer can be used to sled down in winter. Planted logs or stepping stone paths can lead children here and there in different weather conditions. Covered areas or roofed playhouses provide shelter on drizzly days. Shrubs can be planted together in groups to create fun gathering nooks.

Rusty Keeler is the creator of Planet Earth Playscapes and works throughout the world creating one-of-a-kind, community-built natural playscapes for children. He gives lectures and workshops internationally and has traveled to China building environmental playscapes for children in orphanages. (See pictures and projects at [www.earthplay.net](http://www.earthplay.net).)



He has recently illustrated the book *Woodshop for Kids* by Jack McKee (Hands on Books, 2005) and is currently writing the upcoming book on natural playscapes *Earth Play* with Exchange Press. Rusty lives with his wife in the woods and hills of upstate New York and may be outside snowshoeing at this very moment . . .

If planted strategically shrubs can help block cold winds in winter or act as living snow fences that collaborate with the wind to form swirling drifts. I can picture you now: bundled up with a class gathering in the middle of a ring of soft evergreen trees — cozy, protected, enjoying a nice pine smell, too!

## Dreaming and planning

Do you have ideas for a natural playscape you'd like to build in the spring? Winter is the perfect time to start planning! Here are five ideas to help you plan your playscape project:

- **Form a playscape committee of interested folks to help you.** You know you have creative staff and parents. Put the word out and see what their ideas are! A fun, energetic team can make dreams a reality.
- **Dream the playscape.** Think about adding rolling hills, places to ride

tricycles, storage areas, sand and water construction zones, forests of small trees, a gathering boulder, dramatic play houses, quiet hangout spots, and wide open multi-use areas.

- **Make a "Master Plan" map of your area.** Measure your space and draw it on paper with existing landmarks and features. Now change it into the playscape of your dreams. Use crayons, markers, pens or pencils, and sketch out your ideas. Color the playscape with sensory interest and seasonal surprises.
- **Make a "Wish List" of donated materials and volunteer labor for your project and circulate it.** Your "material wish list" may include items such as topsoil, trees, lumber, boulders, and birdhouses. Your "labor wish list" may ask for help from landscapers, gardeners, masons, carpenters, or cooks.

- **Build your natural playscape with volunteers.** Based on the size of your project, schedule a weekend workday or two and invite folks to come and spend the day improving the children's environment. If you provide child care and meals, they will come! A volunteer building project not only creates a beautiful space for children, but builds community friendships as well.

## 'Tis the season

So whether you're enjoying the break from the hot sun or wishing with chattering teeth you lived on a tropical island, winter is both a time to bravely explore the outdoors with children and a time to plan improvements to your outdoor environment. Create a natural playscape for your children, and you'll be amazed at the opportunities for play and discovery all seasons of the year.

